

VZCZCXRO1628

PP RUEHAG RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHKUK RUEHROV

DE RUEHLB #1406/01 2691420

ZNY CCCCC ZZH

P 251420Z SEP 08

FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3166

INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE

RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE

RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 2975

RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 3188

RHMFISS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL

RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001406

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA

ALSO FOR IO ACTING A/S HOOK, PDAS WARLICK

P FOR DRUSSELL AND RRANGASWAMY

USUN FOR KHALILZAD/WOLFF/SCHEDLBAUER

NSC FOR ABRAMS/RAMCHAND/YERGER/MCDERMOTT

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/24/2018

TAGS: PREL PGOV PTER PINR UNSC LE MARR MOPS SY

SUBJECT: LEBANON: CHRISTIAN RECONCILIATION UNLIKELY,  
DESPITE GEAGEA'S APOLOGY

REF: A. BEIRUT 1395

1B. BEIRUT 1360

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires William Grant for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (SBU) Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea apologized for mistakes made by the Lebanese Forces during the 1975-90 civil war and called for unity and reconciliation during his September 21 speech before tens of thousands of supporters at a ceremony honoring Lebanese Forces members killed during the war. His remarks were praised by pro-March 14 political figures and notably, independent MP Michel Murr. But two pro-opposition Christian leaders and Geagea rivals, Suleiman Franjieh and Michel Aoun, dismissed Geagea's remarks as insincere and little more than rhetoric. A recent clash between Geagea's Lebanese Forces and Franjieh's Marada party sparked renewed calls for reconciliation among Lebanese Christians in the wake of recent "reconciliation" meetings between Druze and Sunnis on the one hand, and Hezbollah on the other. However, given the criticism directed at Geagea by opposition Christians following his speech, we see such reconciliation as unlikely in the near term. End summary.

GEAGEA CALLS FOR  
CHRISTIAN UNITY

12. (SBU) Lebanese Forces (LF) leader Samir Geagea apologized for actions taken by LF during the Civil War at a memorial ceremony honoring LF members killed during the war on September 21. The gathering, held in the town of Jounieh, was attended by other prominent Christian political figures, including Geagea's March 14 Christian allies, former President Amine Gemayel and MP Nayla Mouawad, members of the government, and tens of thousands of supporters. Geagea's speech came only four days after LF supporter Pierre Ishaq and rival Marada member Youssef Franjieh were killed when clashes broke out between the two parties in the northern town of Bsarma on September 17.

13. (SBU) In his speech, Geagea called upon "the people of Lebanon" to look forward to unity and reconciliation and insisted that Christian unity was the key. In the speech, Geagea apologized for "mistakes that we committed when we were carrying out our national duties during past Civil War

years." Geagea posed several rhetorical questions in his speech aimed at discrediting his Christian rivals Suleiman Franjieh and Michel Aoun who have allied with Hizballah. "Do you want us to unite over bringing Syrian authority back to Lebanon;" "Do you want us to unite over the practice of camping in Beirut as a means to change and reform?;" and "We aim to unite, but over what? Over Hizballah's weapons, at the expense of the Lebanese state, until the liberation of Palestine and the resolution of the Middle East Peace Process, or until the investigation with the Army Command regarding sending the helicopter to a Hizballah location."

PRAISE FROM ALLIES

---

¶4. (C) Geagea's remarks received praise from a number of political leaders. In a September 22 meeting with the Ambassador, Greek Orthodox MP Michel Murr, who is not aligned with either the opposition or the majority, endorsed Geagea's remarks and assessed Geagea's approach as positive. Murr declared to the press the same day his support for Geagea's position on "issues of principle," which he noted enjoys widespread support. Accepting the apology, Murr said, "I got over the personal issue. I forgot it." (Note: Geagea was found guilty and served years in prison, in part for attempting to kill Murr. End note.)

¶5. (C) The March 14 Secretariat, in a recent newsletter, praised Geagea's "mea culpa" and stressed the importance of apologies saying, "Unless you are ready to admit your mistakes and apologize, you do not deserve the right to live

BEIRUT 00001406 002 OF 003

with others."

FRANJIEH: A LEOPARD  
CANNOT CHANGE ITS SPOTS

---

¶6. (C) Opposition leaders were swift to deliver their criticisms against Geagea. During a September 22 press conference, Former MP and Marada party leader Suleiman Franjieh acknowledged that Geagea had apologized, but added that Geagea simultaneously "launched a campaign against Aoun and me." Franjieh added, "A leopard cannot change its spots." (Note: Franjieh's parents were killed in 1978 by Kataeb (Phalangist) militiamen, an act attributed to Geagea, a Kataeb member at that time. End note.)

¶7. (C) Franjieh further stated that he does not consider te apology to be sincere because Geagea couched i as part of "carrying out his national duty." Nvertheless, Franjieh accepted the apology and challenged Geagea "to go to reconciliation. At the same time, Franjieh accused Geagea of apologizing only because the latter's March 14 counterparts pressured him to do so.

¶8. (C) Franjieh advisors, Rony Araygi and Richard Haykal, told Pol/Econ Chief on September 24 that Franjieh and the Marada party do not "trust" Geagea. If Geagea really wants reconciliation, they said, then Geagea would participate in a dialogue with all Christian groups to achieve Christian unity. Franjieh believes that the role of President Sleiman in any such talks is the key to move forward and is pushing for Sleiman's participation. However, Aryaji and Haykal were unaware whether Sleiman had agreed to assume the position as mediator. (Note: Press reports on September 25 indicate Maronite Patriarch Nasrallah Sfeir blessed the reconciliation efforts of the Maronite League after he was urged by President Sleiman, prior to his September 23-25 visit to the U.S., to help achieve unity among Lebanese Christians. It is not clear, however, if Sleiman intends to play the role of mediator himself. End note.)

OTHER OPPOSITION LEADERS  
DEEM APOLOGY "INSINCERE"

-----  
¶9. (C) Head of Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) and opposition-allied Christian leader Michel Aoun found fault with the apology's intended recipients, saying that Geagea should have specifically directed his remorse to Franjieh, former Prime Minister Omar Karami, and head of National Liberal Party Dory Chamoun. FPM's website alleged that Geagea's speech was motivated by parliamentary elections aspirations. Hizballah MP Mohammed Raad, during a condolence call to Franjieh, accused Geagea of making an apology to avoid reconciliation.

WHY WAS JUMBLATT MUM?

-----

¶10. (C) Some political observers noted that Druze leader and March 14 figure Walid Jumblatt had refrained from commenting on his March 14 partner Geagea's apology and interpreted his silence as a sign of discontent. Druze Minister Wael Abu Faour, one of Jumblatt's close advisors, confirmed to LES Senior Political Advisor that Jumblatt was unhappy with Geagea's remarks. He explained that Jumblatt interpreted Geagea's references to civil war alliances as reintroducing political problems at the expense of national unity.

BSARMA INCIDENT REMAINS  
A THORN IN GEAGEA'S APOLOGY

-----

¶11. (C) With LES Senior Political Advisor, former Minister of Foreign Affairs Jean Obeid dismissed Geagea's apology as "just a maneuver," explaining that if Geagea were serious, he would have answered Franjieh's phone call the day Geagea was released from prison. (Note: According to Geagea's advisor Elie Khoury, when Geagea was released from prison in 2005, Franjieh had tried to reach out to Geagea through a

BEIRUT 00001406 003 OF 003

journalist intermediary. The journalist purportedly did not transmit the message appropriately to Geagea, who then boarded a plane to Paris and the matter was dropped altogether. End note.) Obeid also said Geagea would have reached out to Karami prior to his formal apology, if he was sincere.

COMMENT

-----

¶12. (C) This is not the first time there has been talk of a Geagea-Franjieh reconciliation. In June, Geagea advisor Elie Khoury disclosed to PolOff that he and Franjieh aide Araygi had been discussing thawing the relations between their bosses. According to Khoury at the time, Geagea was making overtures to Franjieh as part of a larger strategy to make alliances in anticipation of the parliamentary elections. We heard that Franjieh's aid said that the LF's efforts were "too late."

¶13. (C) Other recent "reconciliation" meetings, i.e., between Druze and Sunni on the one hand, and Hizballah on the other, were focused on easing tensions between the parties and to prevent further sectarian clashes. Geagea and Franjieh do not appear ready to follow suit. The multitude of criticism targeted at Geagea by opposition leaders suggests reconciliation is unlikely in the near term, without some other party as mediator, such as President Sleiman. End comment.

GRANT